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Citation for final published version:

Chan, Hiu M. 2017. Film criticism in the digital age [Book Review]. Digital Journalism 5 (10) , pp. 1353-1354. 10.1080/21670811.2017.1368639 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1368639>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1368639>>

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Film Criticism in the Digital Age

Although marginal, film criticism in newspapers has long existed as part of journalism. Academic discussion of news media in general, however, often excludes the film review section and its contribution to journalism. This may reflect views on *truth*-telling, and what kinds of “fact” we receive when a critic tells us what she feels about a recent film she watched through her most personal wording. Scholars, in these scenarios, might doubt the “journal-ism” involved. *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*, however, intervenes to reconsider how research on film criticism fits within discussions on journalism, and on society more broadly.

Focusing on different cases of film criticism, the editors ask: How has the status of the critic changed with digital media and the changes and demise of traditional media outlets, and to what extent do critics intervene in popular discourse on art and culture? Across fourteen chapters, scholars and film critics alike explore these questions within four categories: the relationship between critic and audience; new activities for online film criticism; institutional platforms and conditions which support the activities of film criticism; and, the current state of professional criticism in a digital era.

Greg Taylor opens, arguing that criticism, or more precisely “evaluation”, has become more transparent and allows us to express self-identities, and within unique spaces this enables a community of like-minded people to gather. Sayad then elaborates, exploring the relationship between the critic and audience as, in fact, dynamic and inter-active. To make sense of the crisis facing criticism in the digital era, she proposes that a triangular relationship between critics, audiences and authors should be given greater attention. Daniel McNeil’s chapter addresses the work of Armond White, to argue White’s resistance towards bloggers and “amateur pundits” represents a misunderstood voice in the debates on the critic–audience relationship, drawing our attention to critics’ public duty to respond to art with honesty. These chapters form Part I but leave many questions unanswered—Who can be a film critic? How do audiences respond to online criticism?—these urge scholars to take audience’s active response, and critics’ engagement, into account when thinking about “public duty” and “responsibility”.

Part II, New Forms and Activities, investigates new platforms and the influence digital media have on traditional “professional” and emerging “amateur” critics. While the boundary between “professional” and “amateur” has blurred in journalism (as argued by many), even a specialised aspect of journalism such as film criticism faces similar challenges. Frey’s chapter looks at a well-

known online platform, Rotten Tomatoes, arguing that it enables a more democratic space for criticism production and distribution which venerates “the traditional ideas of criticism and erect new barriers to enter the profession” (p. 15). Frey effectively problematises simplistic binary positions between “professional” and “amateur”, pushing towards theoretical engagements with Noël Carroll’s writings on the essence of criticism. Giacomo Manzoli and Paolo Noto join this debate, looking at the online video film review culture in Italy, and suggesting that there is evidence of preserving the alleged function, and the distinctive jargon, of traditional film criticism, through new possibilities enabled by new internet technology. Maria San Filippo sees the interactive space for communities as counter-publics, in a study of “AfterEllen”, a pioneering community for queer female amateur critics. Finally, for this section, Noah Tsika’s looks at the Nigerian blogging culture, and criticism from local and diasporic communities, bringing important international insight into the development of online film review culture.

Part III focuses on the discussions around institutions and the profession. Anne Hurault-Paupe, Outi Hakola and Thomas Elsaesser each address broader arguments about the role of a critic, and the purpose of criticism. Hurault-Paupe investigates the web presence of some of the leading U.S. film critic associations, examining their changes over time in self-branding, underscoring the tension between “professional” and “amateur”. Hakola identifies a similar change among Finnish critics. Studying surveys and statements by professional Finnish critics, Hakola concludes with the profession as surviving or in crisis as largely age related, where older critics hold a more traditional view of their role and take the profession more seriously, and younger critics are more relaxed about professional status, with greater enthusiasm for exploring new technological innovations. Elsaesser revisits work of pioneering critics, including Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Edgar Morin and Parker Tyler. To Elsaesser, these early critics are still needed as models in a digital age, as regardless the form it takes, we need soulful, personal, yet social criticism. This is perhaps most relevant to our more general thinking on the issue of “responsibility”. Although sentimental, Elsaesser’s esteem towards a quality and decent film criticism culture is indeed encouraging; in their content, reflexivity and caring, critics can create a moving truth for the wider public.

The final part of the book offers self-reflections by film critics Jasmina Kallay, Armond White and Nick James. This opportunity to read critics’ own words about their profession, their role and their views on what their responsibility should be, is valuable. Finally, excerpts from “Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet: A Critical Symposium” are included, with reflections from film critic bloggers on their culture and practice.

Orchestrating the interventions in this volume, the editors provoke wider

reflection on three problematics: the ongoing gaps between film studies academics and society, between research of film criticism and journalism, and between academic writing and journalistic writing more generally. Film review is a unique research area, sparking debates around broader questions of objectivity, subjectivity, and philosophy and responsibility in journalism. Frey and Sayad have taken a major step forward for both film studies and journalism studies, inviting us to engage with these debates more seriously. However, while this volume reflects deeper thinking on criticism within democracy and individual critic's responsibilities, the fundamental question Frey presents (above), in my view, has not changed at all: criticism's role in journalism persists, regardless of the technological age we live in.

Hiu M. Chan